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ABSTRACT

Is it possible that what is perceived as self-assertion in a man is perceived as aggression in a woman? These studies investigate whether (a) consciously feminist women place a greater than average importance on the value of equality and whether (b) women's approval for self-assertion in themselves and others interacts with their feminist attitudes. The measures used in these studies of northeast college women include the Rokeach terminal value survey and a modified version of the 30-Item Schedule for assessing Assertive Behavior. Study One found significant differences in the importance placed on equality by women identified by their self-reported levels of feminism. In Study Two, the differences were in the same direction although not statistically reliable. There were no statistically significant differences in levels of approval for assertiveness by sex of actor. However, Study One showed a tendency for strongly feminist women to wish to become more assertive, although this difference failed to achieve statistical significance. It is suggested that the overall lack of significant findings is largely due to the restricted range of the samples involved as well as to the preliminary nature to this inquiry and its choice of methodology. (Author)

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Equality, Feminism, and Self-assertion

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EQUALITY, FEMINISM, AND ATTITUDES

TOWARDS SELF-ASSERTION

Although assertiveness training was invented as a set of techniques to correct personal deficiencies in interpersonal skills, it is clear that assertiveness training programs are also being offered as a corrective for a collective problem that women face when they wish to assert themselves in a sexist society. (Krischner, 1976; Nietzel and Bernstein, 1976; Rathus, 1973; and Winship and Kelley, 1976). In fact, it appears that the distinction between what is properly self-assertive and improperly aggressive behavior may be harder to make for a woman than for a man. No woman wants to be a 'push-over', but asserting herself she might easily and confusingly appear to herself and others as a 'castrating bitch.' Is it possible that what is perceived as self-assertion in a man, is perceived as aggression in a woman?

It occurred to us that women who have been led to conscious reflection on their culturally prescribed roles and who have endorsed a feminist perspective at the level of their verbal attitudes, might in their personal lives still have to work through many confusing conflicts between traditionally prescribed role responses and the new roles they seek for themselves. In a previous study (Mei, 1976), one of us has shown that self-identified feminists scored significantly different from other women on two paper and pencil tests designed to demonstrate the difference between verbal endorsement of pro-feminist attitudes and emotional commitment to non-traditional role-taking. In one of these tests women characters acted either in compliance with or contrary to traditional sex-role norms prescribing dependency or unassertiveness. The norms 'tested' in these hypothetical situations were all taken from the items used by Spence and Helmreich (1972) to construct

their Attitudes Towards Women (ATW) scale. This permitted us to score for consistency of responding between the attitude scale item, where the norm was stated explicitly, and the situational item, where the norm was invoked implicitly to justify a character's behavior. Self-identified feminists, recruited in part through their association with a feminist resource center, were not only clearly distinguishable in terms of their ATW scores from moderate or weakly feminist women, they also responded with greater consistency and less variability to all the situational items. We interpreted these findings to mean that while weak feminists were often confused about the appropriate norms to invoke in evaluating another woman's behavior, strong feminists were clearly and consistently responding in terms of new norm that requires equality in all situations involving men and women.

Next, we speculated on the ways in which women gain a greater consciousness-of-role and proposed a method for increasing attitude consistency by a process intended to increase the salience of the value "equality." We thought that equality is a critical value that differentiates strong feminists from moderate or weak ones, and we hypothesized that strongly pro-feminist attitudes would be associated with a high regard for the value of equality. Conversely, more traditional women perhaps rank other values more highly than equality, but by so doing inadvertently place themselves in a position of accepting social norms and practices that define the 'proper' status for her sex as subordinate and inferior.

In short, we set out to investigate whether consciously feminist women place a greater than average importance on the value of equality. Because self-assertion behavior is so clearly linked to the value of equality, we further expected that women's <u>approval for self-assertion</u> in themselves and in others might interact with their feminist attitudes. Thus, strongly

feminist women might be expected to see self-assertion as more desirable and weakly feminist women might approve of self-assertion in a man more positively than of the same behaviors in a woman.

Methods

We are going to report two rather similar studies on two dissimilar samples of college women. Ss in the first study were students in a 4-year state college, that enrolls predominantly in-state students from lower middle class backgrounds. This sample included 22 men along with the 44 women on whom we will report here. All Ss participated during classtime in a course on abnormal psychology and another one on social psychology.

All Ss filled out a questionnaire consisting of four parts:

(1) the Rokeach Value Survey (Form D) which presents a list of 18 frequently named 'guiding principles' (values) which Ss are required to rank from most to least important;

(2) a 10-item Assertiveness Survey which Ss were asked to answer first in terms of how they themselves would behave (real behavior), and then in terms of whether they considered each of the behaviors listed as desirable (ideal behavior);

(3) 10 paragraphs describing a hypothetical character, named either Mary or John, exhibiting an assertive response to the sorts of situations typically invoked in assertiveness inventory items (such as asking for service, making a complaint, etc.); Ss were asked to state their approval or disapproval of the action exhibited by the character in the situation, and finally, to evaluate their overall impression of John or Mary;

(4) a final section consisted of 8 questions concerning Ss' evaluation of the Women's Liberation Movement. Four of the questions constituted an index of approval for feminist ideology used by Tavris (1973) in a national study.

Subjects in the second study were students at an Eastern private college for women, enrolling students from predominantly upper-middle and upper class backgrounds. There were 87 women in this sample, 70 recruited through an introductory psychology course which gave them credit for experimental participation; the remaining 17 were asked to participate after being identified by peers as 'probably out of sympathy' with women's liberation. (See below). This group was part of a larger attitude-change experiment which we will not have time to describe here.

Ss in the second study answered a questionnaire much like the one described above, but with certain modifications.

(1) We again used the Rokeach Value Survey (Form D);

(2) but took our assertiveness inventory from the Rathus Schedule for Assessing Assertive Behavior (1973); we modified the items slightly so that each item pertained to male-female interactions, and Ss were again asked to fill out the schedule once to describe their typical current behavior (real) and once again to describe what they considered as ideal or desirable behavior;

(3) The third part consisted of four paragraphs describing a character, named either Mary or John, engaging in assertive actions; Ss were asked to evaluate their total impressions of either John or Mary on 9 semantic differential scales.

(4) The final section again consisted of the 8 questions about Ss' attitudes towards women's liberation.

Results

We began by dividing each sample into Strong, Moderate or Weak Feminists on the basis of their scores on the 4-item feminism index. Dividing the sample into thirds, we ended up in Study #1 with 19 women classified as Strong Feminists (Mean = 11.7), 13 women classified as Moderate Feminists (mean = 9.8) and 12

women as Weak Feminists (mean = 7.5). In Study #2 this division resulted in a similar grouping until we discovered that for this second sample the individual items constituting the index intercorrelated so poorly that we shifted, midway in our data collection, to another 20-item scale devised by Smith, Feree and Miller (1975). The original Ss were re-contacted and asked to answer the 20 additional questions. The reason for the low inter-item correlations became clearer upon close inspection of the data: very few Ss in our second sample answered our index questions in either a "weak" or a "strong" feminist way. In essence, we had sampled only a single group of moderates. To extend the range of scores in our second sample, then, we sought additional "weakly feminist" Ss by the method described above, and would have tried to contact additional "strong feminist" Ss as well if time had permitted it. Utilizing the 20-item Smith, Ferree and Miller scale, we again divided our sample into thirds and wound up with 26 women classified as Strong Feminists (mean = 4.54), 36 women in a Moderate group (mean = 3.96) and 25 women classified as Weak Feminists (mean = 3.34). Needless to say, the feminism measures in the first and second study are not completely comparable and it is still our impression that we sampled a much more restricted range of attitudes in the second group.

Let us look now at the question concerning the relation between feminism and the relative rank-order of importance accorded to the value Equality. Figure 1 presents a comparison of the mean rank for equality, broken down by the

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Insert Figure 1 here

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three feminism subgroups for the two studies. Rokeach (1973) reports that the mean value among his college student samples for equality is 11th. In our State College sample (Study #1) the mean value for equality among the strongly feminist sub-group was 8.7, that for the moderates 9.2, and the mean for weak feminists

was 12.9. These differences were significant when we applied a median test (chi-square = 8.47; $p<.01$ for 2 df). Among the Eastern College sample the differences between strong, moderate, and weak feminists were in the same direction but not statistically significant. Of interest also is the fact that the average ranking of Equality for all students in this second sample was noticeably lower than in the State College sample and than the national averages reported by Rokeach.

Next, we tested our hypothesis that assertiveness would be more highly valued by our strong feminist Ss than their less feminist peers. Neither sample showed significant differences in their mean scores for either real levels of self-assertion or ideal levels of assertion as a function of feminist attitudes. A good many Ss, however, stated their ideal level of assertiveness was below their actu assertion and others felt that the level of assertion that was desirable for them was well above their actual assertion score. Thus, we normalized each of these score distributions and calculated a difference score. Figure 2 presents mean difference scores comparing a woman's real vs. her ideal assertion levels, as a function of her degree of feminism. Scores below 100

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Insert Figure 2 here

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indicate Ss set their ideal level of assertion above their real assertion score. In the State College sample, Strongly Feminist Ss tend to set their ideals well above their actual assertion levels (mean = 96.0) and this is not true for either the Moderate group (mean = 101.3) or the Weakly Feminist group (mean = 102.5). However, the differences between the groups did not reach statistical significance ($F=1.26$, df 2,43). In the Eastern College sample it is the Moderate group that shows up most different: as compared to either weak or strong feminist Ss, they set their ideal below their own real assertion scores more

often than not. But, again, the differences do not meet a level of confidence that would permit us to reject the null hypothesis. (The mean scores for Strong, Moderate, and Weak groups were, respectively, 99.0, 103.5 and 97.0; $F = 1.54$ for 2,84 df). Thus, we must reject the hypothesis that feminist attitudes in these samples were significantly related to real and ideal self-assertion scores.

Our third hypothesis states that we expect an interaction between feminist attitudes and the relative degrees of approval and disapproval accorded to a male or a female actor engaging in self-assertive behaviors. Table 1 presents the data for the State College sample (Study #1) in the form of mean approval ratings for the male and female versions of the situations presented. Again, overall approval did not differ significantly by sex of character, although

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Insert Table 1 here

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the means reveal a trend in the direction of higher approval for female self-assertion among the Strong Feminist Ss.

In the Eastern College sample this hypothesis was evaluated in terms of the Ss responses to the 9 semantic differential scales. The semantic differential data were first factor analyzed, yielding three factors. The first factor extracted is comprised of the items intelligent-stupid, stable-unstable, competent-incompetent, and fair-unfair. Scores on this factor did not significantly differentiate the average ratings accorded to the male or female self-assertive actor, nor was there a main effect for feminism or an interaction effect. Factor 2 loaded highly on three items: overconfident-uncertain, strong-willed-weak-willed, and nasty-nice. We named this our Nasty Bitch factor and calculated average factor scores as shown in Table 2. Since low scores represent the overconfident-strong willed-nasty end of the dimension

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Insert Table 2 here

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inspection of the means shows a tendency for Strong Feminists to rate the Female character more favorably and weak Feminists to rate her more unfavorably. However, once again the trend is not statistically reliable and neither the main effects for Sex of Character and Feminism nor their interaction yielded a significant F-value.

The final factor consisted of the items bold-timid and quiet-outspoken. It has such a low Eigenvalue we did not analyze it further.

Discussion

Clearly, we anticipated our discussion of the first finding, linking equality to feminism in the State College sample, but not in the Eastern College sample, by our remarks on the difficulty of finding an adequate range of attitudes in our samples. As matters stand, the attitude items we used may discriminate people with different opinions but they serve poorly to discriminate different levels of commitment. Even so, the Ss who were labelled "Strong Feminists" in the first study confirmed our hypothesis by preferring equality over a number of other values that were ranked more highly by other, more traditional women. Thus, these women ranked equality (and also a sense of accomplishment) above family security and a comfortable life, whereas in the Moderate and Weak Feminist groups this order was usually reversed.

A comparison of the average value rank-orders in the Eastern College sample (Study #2) reveals not only that equality is given much lower importance than is customary among college samples, but also that it is not only such 'traditional' values as wisdom, mature love, and self-respect that win out over equality, but also an exciting life and a sense of accomplishment. (See Appendix) We tend to think that this group of women are preoccupied with their

own (considerable) prospects for success in the world and feel little identification with women in general or with women's collective minority status.

With regard to our second and third hypotheses we must be much more tentative. We think that anecdotal evidence and personal experience are correct and that the self-assertive woman faces more disapproval than the self-assertive man. Our evidence only shows a slight trend and that in the direction of greater approval from strong feminists, who also seem themselves to desire higher levels of self-assertion than they currently practice. Absolute levels of self-assertion or of ideally desirable levels of self-assertion did not differ as a function of degree of feminism; only the direction of the differences between ideal and real supports this very tentative conclusion, and only the State College sample shows this trend.

What are the implications for women's career experiences in the world beyond school? We think that women from the Eastern College will set high goals, strive hard, and achieve a good deal of recognition as well as satisfaction without much change in values or in their emotional commitment to women's issues unless and until they encounter frustration and disappointment. In a world of business and government organizations that seek to place highly trained women in positions of responsibility that kind of disappointment may never come, or it may come in the context of one's personal life rather than in the course of one's career. For reasons that are not apparent from our data (but that may have to do with living and studying in a more tradition-oriented, co-educational environment), women from the State College sample who were strongly feminist gave greater value to equality as a guiding principle. For them we can expect the going will be harder: perceiving things differently from their peers and demanding greater recognition and respect for themselves as well as for women in general is likely to put them in conflict situations that test their mettle and provoke negative sanctions from

others. Conversely, their weakly feminist peers seem to value family security and a comfortable life well above equality and may continue to seek a sense of accomplishment from traditional family roles. So be it.

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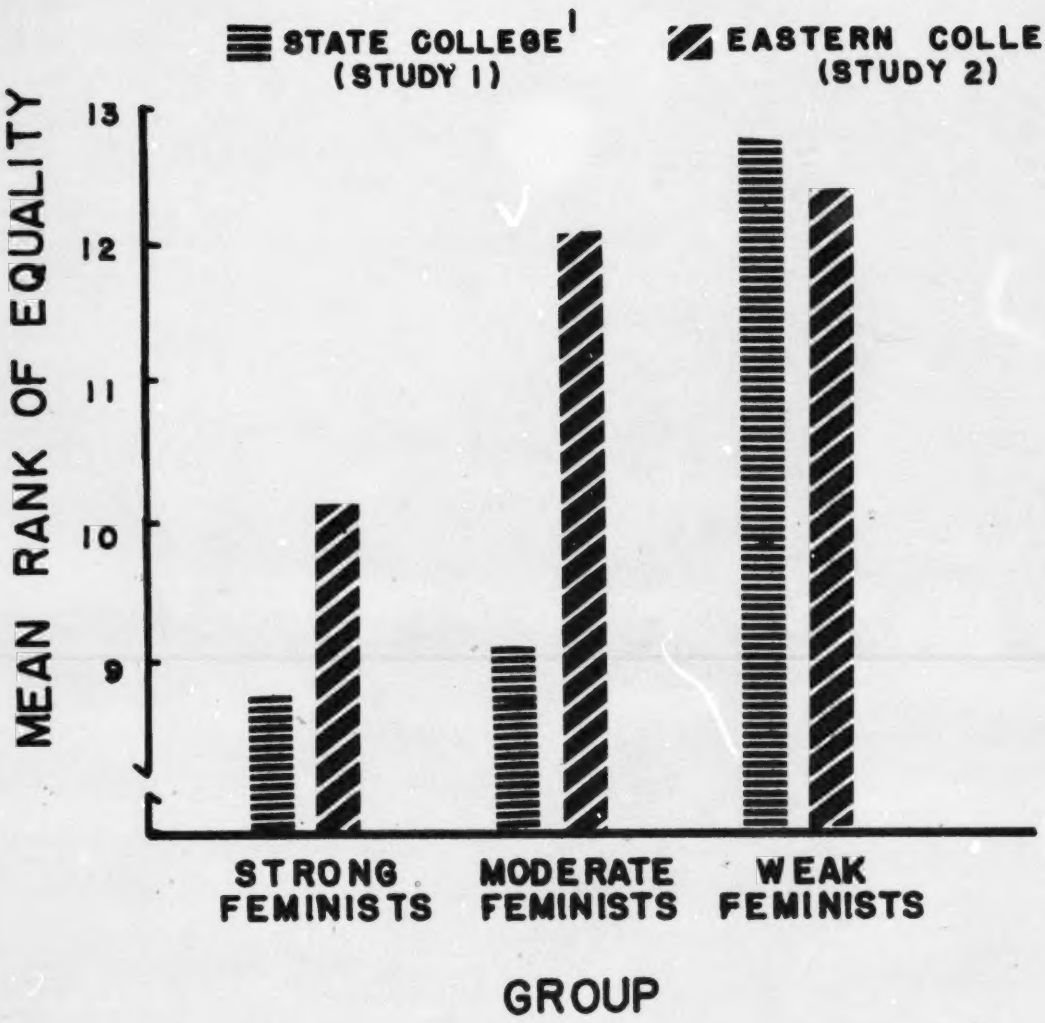
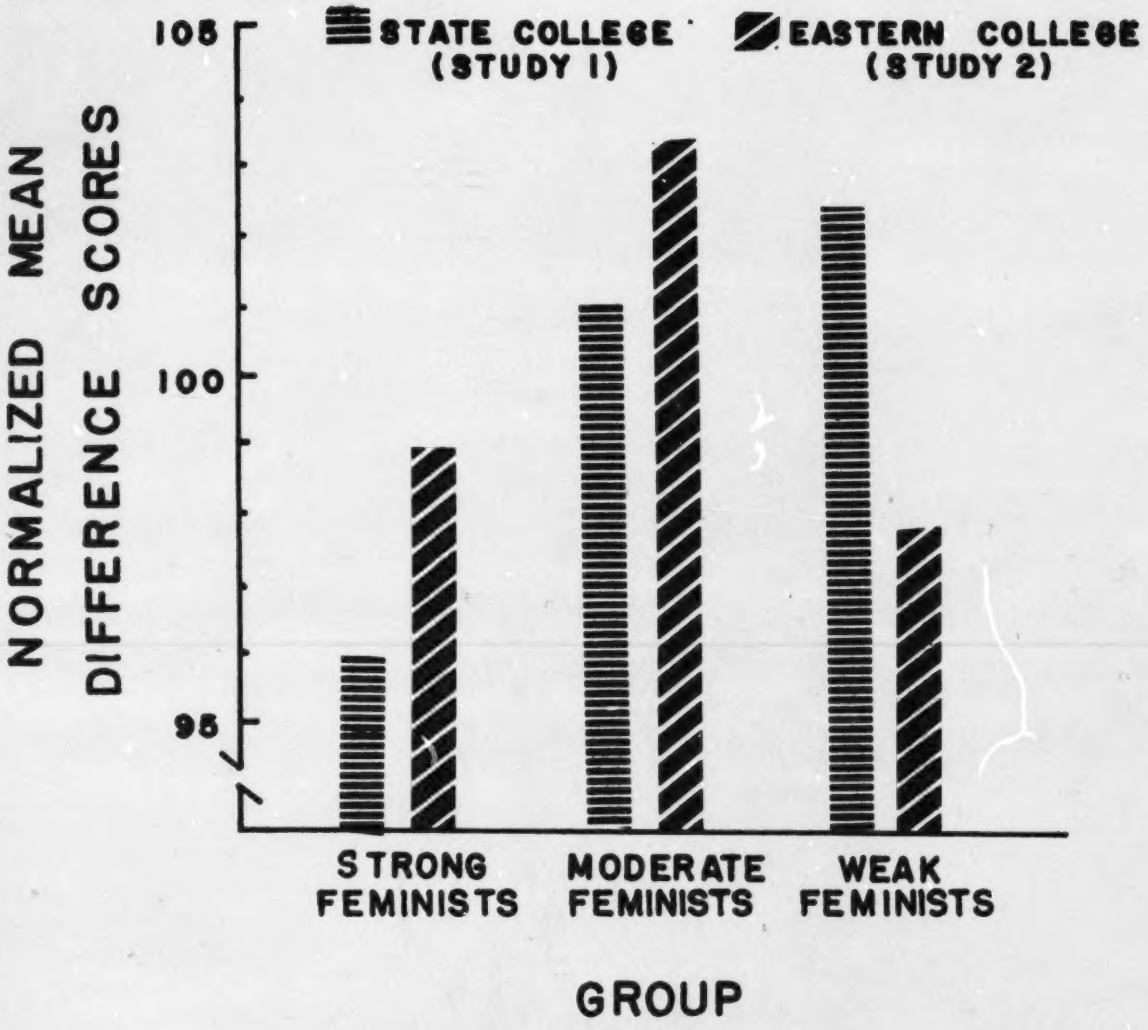


1. MEDIAN TEST $P \leq .01$
2. MEDIAN TEST NS

FIGURE 1. A COMPARISON OF THE MEAN RANK OF EQUALITY BY FEMINIST GROUP IN TWO COLLEGE SAMPLES.



NOTE THAT REAL AND IDEAL ASSERTION SCORES WERE ASSESSED BY DIFFERENT SCALES IN THE TWO STUDIES

FIGURE 2. NORMALIZED DIFFERENCE SCORES FOR REAL-IDEAL ASSERTION BY FEMINIST GROUP FOR TWO SAMPLES.

Table 1. Means and Summary Analysis of Variance for Overall Disapproval of Male and Female Assertive Characters [State College Sample]

ATTITUDES[a]	SEX OF CHARACTER	
	Female	Male
Strong Feminists (n = 19)	17.20	20.89
Moderate Feminists (n = 13)	22.00	20.00
Weak Feminists (n = 12)	20.71	21.60

Source	Sum Squares	Df	Mean Square	F	P
Total	1350.35	43			
Between Grps	77.23	5	15.44		
Sex (A)	5.79	1	5.79	0.17	NS
Feminism (B)	29.04	2	14.52	0.43	NS
AXB	42.40	2	21.20	0.63	NS
Within Groups	1273.11	38	33.50		

[a]Feminism assessed by our own 4-item index.

Table 2. Means and Summary Analysis of Variance for Factor 2 Scores on Evaluation of Male and Female Characters [Eastern College Sample]

ATTITUDES[a]	SEX OF CHARACTER	
	Female	Male
Strong Feminists (n = 26)	9.42	8.71
Moderate Feminists (n = 36)	8.55	8.56
Weak Feminists (n = 25)	7.92	8.38

Source	Sum of Squares	Df	Mean Square	F	P
Total	333.45	86			
Between Grps.	16.79	5	3.35		
Sex (A)	0.11	1	0.11	—	NS
Feminism (B)	11.79	2	5.89	1.51	NS
A X B	4.88	2	2.44	0.62	NS
Error Within Grps.	316.65	81	3.90		

[a]Feminism assessed by 20-item scale taken from Miller, Smith, Ferree (1976)

Table 3. Mean Rank Order of Terminal Values by Level of Feminism in the State College and Eastern College Samples.

	STATE COLLEGE (n=44)			EASTERN COLLEGE (n=87)		
	Strong	Mod.	Weak	Strong	Mod.	Weak
1. A COMFORTABLE LIFE (a prosperous life)	12	11	9	13	11	9
2. AN EXCITING LIFE (a stimulating, active life)	13	13	13	7	5	12
3. A SENSE OF ACCOMPLISHMENT (lasting contribution)	10	12	8	6	8	7
4. A WORLD AT PEACE (free of war and conflict)	8	5	10	10	12	11
5. A WORLD OF BEAUTY (beauty of nature and the arts)	15	14	17	14	13	15
6. EQUALITY(brotherhood, equal opportunity for all)	9	10	14	11	15	14
7. FAMILY SECURITY (taking care of loved ones)	11	8	7	12	10	5
8. FREEDOM (independence,free choice)	5	4	5	5	6	4
9. HAPPINESS (contentedness)	2	2	1	1	1	2
10. INNER HARMONY (freedom from inner conflict)	7	6	6	9	7	9
11. MATURE LOVE (sexual & spiritual intimacy)	1	1	3	3	3	1
12. NATIONAL SECURITY (Protection from attack)	18	18	18	18	18	18
13. PLEASURE (an enjoyable, leisurely life)	14	16	12	15	14	16
14. SALVATION (saved, eternal life)	17	15	16	17	17	10
15. SELF-RESPECT (self-esteem)	3	3	2	2	2	3
16. SOCIAL RECOGNITION (respect,admiration)	16	17	15	16	16	17
17. TRUE FRIENDSHIP (close companionship)	4	7	4	4	4	6
18. WISDOM (a mature understanding of life)	6	9	11	8	9	8